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ABSTRACT

Bibliotherapy helps children explore, within the security of a story approach, the trauma and drama of life. The proliferation of literature on topics that were once taboo indicates a concern for intent which may result in a bandwagon approach with few criteria of selection. The annotated bibliography provided in this paper includes sixteen books on the topics of divorce, adoption, and death. Selections listed are intended to serve as guideposts for further choice of stories which match the needs of the reader or listener. (Author/KS)

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A MIRROR TO MY WORLD

STORIES TO EASE THE PAIN

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A Mirror to My World

The myth that childhood is a happy haven has been shattered by psychological insights and the focus on feelings, the facing of "self" of the seventies. The realization that children are often confused by fears and anxieties that they have displaced or do not know how to reveal has resulted in the search for realistic stories that mirror the child's world and encourage identification, insight and catharsis.

Realism in literature for children has long been used to develop the child's "character" or to transmit a moral as in Aesop's work and La Fontaines's Fables For Children. Today we have added another dimension: bibliotherapy to help children explore the trauma and drama of life within the security of a fictionalized story approach.

Reading or sharing a story that depicts children with similar fears and tensions mitigates the pain of feeling unique. The sense of alienation when faced with death, divorce, and the unknown of adoption is further minimized with the realization that adults cared enough to write about situations that bother children.

The libraries and bookstores give evidence to this caring about topics that were once taboo, but in selecting books proceed with caution! It is possible to become so involved with the intent that basic ingredients of good literature are overlooked. Traditional elements of realistic themes, consistent, uncluttered plots, non-stereotypic characterization, imaginative, dramatic style, and settings that are true to the time and place of the happenings are essential criteria in book selection.

With topics that are fraught with emotion, adults have to apply these criteria judiciously since the tendency is to select books through idiosyncratic biases, needs, and values. The book should do for the child what Christopher Robin did when predicament laden Pooh Bear pleaded: . . . "Then would you read a 'sustaining' book such as would help and comfort a wedged Bear in Great Tightness." (A.A. Milne, THE WORLD OF POOH BEAR. p. 32-33.)

The use of literature to help children come to grips with personal problems is not new. What is new is the increase in the number of titles published on divorce - one parent families, adoption, and death. This reflects a growing acceptance of alternate life styles and a new openness in discussing death.

It is understood that older children need support and direction in seeking out "feeling" books and teachers and librarians should select and recommend books that are realistic but not missionary and not written to shock or titillate. Older children will ask for the books or will often provide clues in their approach to the books. Insightful teachers can then subtly suggest or share a book with a group to protect the "self" of the young person with the need.

The problem of the match is more difficult with young children since stories that are written <u>for</u> them are most often selected <u>by</u> the adults in their world.

The suggestions for each topic were written for the four to eight year olds. Under each category the starred selections are archetypes for their genre; those not so designated provide a direction for selecting out stories that do not meet essential criteria.

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DIVORCE

*A BOOK FOR JODAN, Marcia Newfield. Athenum, 1975.

Mother is decisive in this story. Children are helped to face separation and divorce with the realization that parental needs are important and can be met without rejecting the child.

*ME DAY, Joan Lexau. Dial Press, 1971.

Rafer has not seen his father during the year that his parents are separated. He appears for Rafer's birthday and the story is worth reading if only for the discussion that Rafer's question to his dad will evoke: "Did you undivorce me?".

MY DAD LIVES IN A DOWNTOWN HOTEL, Peggy Mann. Doubleday, 1973.

Begins with the pre-separation disputes through the finality of Dad removing his belongings. Mother dresses up in anticipation and each time he appears she is devestated. Joey adjusts but Mother doesn't. This is a male oriented presentation with sexist implications.

I WON'T GO WITHOUT A FATHER

The theme centers on the problems of a one-parent family but avoids the issue of what happened to the father. The story is contrived, the denouement unrealistic and hearing it would contribute to a child's sense of alienation.

ADOPTION

*THE CHOSEN BABY, Valentina Wasson. 1957.

A classic. The illustrations and style are dated and stilted but it does attempt to explain the adoption process to young children.

*ABBY, Jeanette Caines. Harper, 1973.

The black, ethnically authentic illustrations of Abby and family are delightful. Abby poses all the questions that a child would ask and her Baby Book provides the answers. This is a reassuring approach with an inclusion of a sibling relationship.

I AM ADOPTED, Susan Lapsley. Bradbury Press, 1974.

Introduces the theme of adoption but explains it as "belonging". It does not help children to pose their questions or to ventilate concerns.

A BABY FOR BETSY, Anne Guy

A sound approach to selection procedures in adoption but it was written in 1957 and is dated with cloying Pink-Blue statements.

DEATH

Of the three topics, the best selections were in this category. Judging by the available stories, it would seem that the theme can be couched in ethereal concepts, while the topics of adoption and divorce need realistic factual/feeling confrontation.

*MY GRANDSON LEW, Charlotte Zolotow. Harper and Row, 1974.

This is a model for books that should encourage an empathic eureka response: "Yes, that's it. That's how it feels to miss someone-to not understand where they went!". Death is a realistic part of the story without preachy, tacky undercurrents. The touching illustrations provide a lovely support for the story.

*WHEN VIOLET DIED, Mildred Kantrowitz. Parent's Magazine Press, 1973.

Who of us does not remember burying a bird? The concept of a funeral is difficult for the young child who senses the tensions yet is excluded. This story helps assuage the finality when Amy laments: "Nothing lasts forever - nothing," at the conclusion of the symbolic funeral. It moves on to develop the continuity of life with the presence of the pregnant cat.

*ANNIE AND THE OLD ONE, Misla Miles. Little Brown, 1971.

A Navajo tale in which Annie's grandmother helps her to cope with death: "You have tried to hold back time. This cannot be done." The identification with Annie's feelings will help children to discuss their concerns about grandparents.

THE BEECH TREE, Pearl Buck. Dell Publ., 1965.

This is an important approach that stresses communication between youth and old age with the emphasis on the on-goingness of life. The author does not pound out her ideas but uses the friction of personalities to clarity concepts. It provides a springboard for surfacing children's worries about grandparents. And let's not forget CHARLOTTE'S WEB, E.B. White's classic story of friendship that treats death as an integral part of the continuity and sadness of life.

THE FIRST SNOW, Helen Coutanti. Alfred Knopf, 1974.

Soft appealing illustrations but the poetic story is confusing. It is allegorical-likening snowflakes to Grandmother's approaching death, but it is elusive and evasive.

THE OLD DOG, S. Abbot.

This is a prototype for pet stories that should be left on the shelf. It degrades the feeling of separation, pain and loss when the dead pet is immediately replaced with a new one who is immediately accepted.

THE TENTH GOOD THING ABOUT BARNEY, Judith Viorst, Atheneum, 1971.

Death as a fertilizer is not a reassuring concept. The funeral, relating the good things about Barney, the illustrations are involving but the theme strays into pollyanna denouement. Books need to respect children's feelings, helping them to stay with them until they are worked through.

NONNA, Jennifer Bartolli, Harvey House

Grandmother dies; the family clan gathers and the possessions rather than the loss become the focus.

These stories provide a direction, a model for other selections. A proliferation of stories that focus on concepts of concern to children are being published or in process. Those involved in love with children's literature need to eschew this bandwagon approach - and reject books that are not authentic.

Painful lessons in death and divorce, the reality of adoption can be faced without lifelong bitterness when they are accepted as part of the pattern of life. Books for children that avoid pat, band-aid solutions can help children to examine their feelings and provide insight into their personal predicaments. The sharing of stories can strengthen adult-child relationships. When teachers or parents find it hard to initiate discussions on anxiety producing themes, the artful book may provide the springboard.